

IDEAS AT *Work*

COMPUTERS/HILLEL SEGAL

Hot program inputs typed text in minutes

Here's a hot new product that will be a big hit in law offices and other situations where existing documents need to be constantly entered into a personal computer.

Called PC Scan Plus from Dest Corp. of Milpitas, Calif., it's an optical character recognition device that can read any page of text into your word processing files in a matter of minutes.

For example, let's say you receive a lengthy typewritten contract in the mail, and you want to change the wording before you sign. Rather than ask the person who sent it to you to make the changes — and thereby possibly reopen the negotiations — it is often preferable to retype the agreement and simply sign the amended version. Of course, the longer the document, the more trouble this approach becomes.

Especially in law offices, where documents generated by other attorneys need to be entered into the computer and amended every day, the idea of a device that could do it all automatically is a potential winner. It could save hours of secretarial time and streamline office operations.

That's the promise of PC Scan, and I'm happy to report that it works exactly as advertised. It's not cheap — with software, the total cost is more than \$3,000, not including a required IBM PC-XT or XT-compatible computer — but this might not be a deterrent in offices where the device could be shared by many people.

Here's how you operate it:

✓ First, the device is placed on top of your personal computer, and a circuit board is installed within the computer. The special software that runs it is contained on your hard disk. A dealer usually does the installation.

✓ After loading the program, you simply insert the page that you want read. It's best to use clean, sharp photocopies, not the original document. This protects you in case a paper feed problem tears or creases the document, and is also good because you can darken the

image when the photocopy is made.

✓ Depending on the amount of copy on the page and how much difficulty the program has in recognizing the characters, it ordinarily takes between one and three minutes for the page to be read.

You then name the newly created file and save it on your hard disk.

✓ Finally, you enter your word processing program, call up the file as if it were originally typed in by yourself, and proceed to make the amendments you desire. If PC Scan had trouble reading any characters, those

characters appear as “#” in the text, so they are easy to spot and correct.

By using the device in conjunction with a spell-checking program, I was able to find any read errors with ease.

In reviewing the device, I was amazed how quickly and accurately it worked. A letter was read in under three minutes, and the result contained only two words that contained “#” and one obvious error.

On the negative side, I did encounter a few problems that you should be aware of. The device is designed to read most common typewriter fonts and some typeset fonts, but has major problems if you feed in a document with fonts it does not recognize.

Second, if the documents being read have columns of text, the columns will be read just as they appear, line by line, with spaces between the columns. This makes it very difficult to edit the text with your word processing program because changes you make in one column will affect the spacing in the other. You may find it faster to cut the page down the middle, photocopy the strips on separate pages, and then read them into PC Scan one at a time.

Overall, the Dest device is a winner, and bound to be a real money-saver in law offices and other business environments that regularly re-enter existing documents into their personal computers.



Segal

Hillel Segal is an independent computer consultant who serves as an expert witness for computer-related litigation. He can be reached at The Association of Computer Users, P.O. Box 9003, Boulder 80301.